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Voglio far il gentiluomo: Conflict in Don Giovanni's Leporello

Amelia Hill, 2009

In *Don Giovanni*, the title character's sexual exploits are made possible through the help of his loyal servant, Leporello. Despite making several comments to Don Giovanni about the immorality of his lifestyle, Leporello keeps guard for his master while he seduces, providing a distraction for husbands and former lovers. He has served faithfully for years, long enough to record eighteen hundred names in his catalogue. Exactly how long this took is open to interpretation. An average of one woman a night (which, though comically exaggerated, seems to fit in the context of the opera) would give us a bare minimum of five years; it is therefore quite reasonable to suggest that Don Giovanni could be a young man. If we imagine an older Don Giovanni, one whose seductions were more drawn out and who, perhaps, is attempting to return to the excesses of his youth, then Leporello has been with him much longer. He imitates Don Giovanni's seduction attempts and, though he goes into it reluctantly, enjoys deceiving Donna Elvira. Although he threatens to leave Don Giovanni more than once, he always returns. This back and forth is the result of Leporello's internal conflict between a moral condemnation of Don Giovanni's lifestyle and a desire to be like him.

From the first recitative, we see multiple examples of Leporello expressing his distaste for Don Giovanni's actions:

Leporello: Bravo! Due impressi leggiadre!

Sforzar la figlia, ed ammazzar il padre!

Giovanni: L'ha voluto, suo danno!

Leporello: Ma Donn'Anna, cosa ha voluto?¹

¹ *Leporello:* Great, two impressive exploits! Seduce the daughter, and murder the father!
Don Giovanni: He willed his ruin.
Leporello: And did Donna Anna will her's [*sic*] too?

Burton Fisher, *Mozart's Don Giovanni* (Coral Gables: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2002), 44.

Translators often render "sforzar" as "ravish" or "seduce," but let us abandon euphemisms; the word means precisely what it sounds like: "to force." That word choice, followed by the implication that Donna Anna was an unwilling participant, demonstrates that Leporello holds no romantic delusions about the nature of Don Giovanni's activities. He did not merely seduce Donna Anna; he raped her, or attempted to.² Although his first line of attack is deception, if that fails he turns to violence, as we see also in his attack

² Depending on whether or not one believes her version of the story.

on Zerlina at the end of the first act. Leporello knows this, and calls him on it. The conversation continues in the next scene, where Leporello proclaims, “La vita che menate è da briccone!”³ But then Giovanni threatens him, and the conversation continues as if nothing had ever happened.

Leporello’s underhanded mockery, however, suggests that he doesn’t really take Don Giovanni’s threats of violence seriously. This mockery appears in the music as well the text: when Don Giovanni asks, “Oh, Leporello mio, va tutto bene?”⁴, Leporello responds with “Don Giovannino mio, va tutto male!”⁵ on the exact same melody (Figure 1⁶). When Don Giovanni asks, “Non conosci il padron?”⁷ Leporello replies, “Così nol conoscessi!”⁸, but after Giovanni reveals himself, the music for Leporello’s “Ah, siete voi?”⁹ does not show any sense of surprise or embarrassment—in fact, it is the same tune as his previous phrase (Figure 2). This suggests that Leporello knew it was him all along, and did not care that the remark was heard. Such barbs as “A forza di chiacchiere, / di vezzi e di bugie, / c’ho imparato sì bene

a voi”¹⁰ are little ways for Leporello to satisfy his need to comment on Don Giovanni’s immorality without having to address it directly.

Leporello’s catalogue aria is an example of the music showing several layers of conflict behind the words. At the beginning Leporello’s melody is simple, an arpeggio on the main chords, with no rhythmic variation and only nonharmonic tones as are necessary to anticipate the chord change (Figure 3). The first time that Leporello recites the numbers on the list, the phrase is simply uttered on a reciting tone. His rhythms begin to speed up with “V’han fra queste contadine,” but he continues to sing with repeated notes, short phrases, and arpeggios. On the repetition of “V’han fra queste contadine” he begins a scale—still a simple idea, but faster and containing more nonharmonic tones, the increased musical tension demonstrating his increased excitement. With “Nella bionda” he begins a new section in triple meter; although the melody is slower, it is both more interesting and more musically tense because of the ornaments (Figure 4). He is no longer merely stating fact; he is speaking admirably of the way that Don Giovanni accomplishes his sexual conquests, a subject with which he is well acquainted but a talent which is far from his personal grasp.

Another layer of meaning, though, lies in the key scheme of the aria. D major, along with its parallel minor, is associated with revenge and punishment for Don Giovanni’s lifestyle.

³ “The life you are leading is disgraceful!” Fisher, *Mozart’s Don Giovanni*, 47.

⁴ “My Leporello! Does all go well?” Ibid., 65.

⁵ “My little Don Giovanni! All goes badly!” Ibid., 65.

⁶ All musical figures are taken from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Giovanni* (New York : G. Schirmer, date unknown), <http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/variations/score/BHQ9391> (accessed April 8, 2009).

⁷ “Don’t you recognize your master?” Fisher, *Mozart’s Don Giovanni*, 97.

⁸ “I wish I never knew him!” Ibid., 97.

⁹ “Oh, is that you?” Ibid., 97.

¹⁰ “I used lots of chatter and the usual deceptions that I have learned so well from you.” Ibid., 65.

D minor is the key that begins the overture and with which Commentadore appears in the second act finale and Don Giovanni is sent to hell. Significant statements are made in D major: Donna Elvira's "Fuggi il traditor!", Donna Anna's "Or sai, chi l'onore," and Don Ottavio and Donna Anna's entrance into "Sola, sola"¹¹ are all in the key of D major.¹²

The significance, then, of setting Leporello's catalogue aria in D major is to link Don Giovanni's misdeeds with his punishment.¹³ This is especially clear in the line "sua passion predominante è la giovin principiante,"¹⁴ which hints at d minor (Figure 5). Leporello's words, and some of his music, express admiration for Don Giovanni's lifestyle, but behind it all is the reminder that Don Giovanni is immoral and Leporello knows it.

There are interesting parallels between the way Don Giovanni treats Leporello and the way he treats the women in the opera. When he does not immediately get unquestioning

obedience from Leporello, he turns to threats of violence, just as he turns to violence when he does not get what he wants from the women. Although he gave Leporello permission to speak freely, when Leporello criticizes his lifestyle, he disregards his promise and makes threats. His other method of gaining obedience is by convincing his victims that his actions are harmless fun and they are crazy to object: his response to Leporello's complaint that he almost got killed is "sei matto, / fu per burlar,"¹⁵ as his defense to Donna Elvira for his seduction of Zerlina was "voglio divertirmi"¹⁶ and his defense to Donna Anna and Don Ottavio against Donna Elvira's accusations is "la povera ragazza è pazza."¹⁷

It is no wonder, then, that Leporello explicitly identifies with the wronged women: in "Ah, pietà, signori miei," he tells them, "Il padron, con prepotenza, / l'innocenza mi rubò."¹⁸ This short passage begins in D major and wanders briefly into d minor. It is the only line where the aria touches on the minor mode. But despite the increase in musical tension due to the key changes, there is also a decrease in musical tension in terms of the melody and phrase organization. The aria starts with uneven phrases, marked by choppy, uneven melodies and frequent changes in the texture of the accompaniment. The uneven phrases result from unexpected repetitions at the end of the phrase; for example, the frantic repetition of "pietà" that rounds

¹¹ This is a particularly jarring key change after Leporello ends in B flat major.

¹² The keys are also associated with revenge and punishment in Mozart's other works: in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Bartolo's "La vendetta" and Count Almaviva's "Vedrò, mentr'io sospiro" are in D major, as is the finale, in which everyone gets revenge on the Count. The Queen of the Night's "Der Hölle Rache" in *Die Zauberflöte* and the "Dies Irae" in Mozart's *Requiem* are both in d minor.

¹³ Don Giovanni's attempted seduction of Elvira's maid ("Deh! vieni alla finestra") is also in the key of D, which further connects his seductions to his punishment, and perhaps suggests that Don Giovanni realizes, consciously or not, that his actions deserve such punishment.

¹⁴ "But his predominant passion is the young beginner." Fisher, *Mozart's Don Giovanni*, 52.

¹⁵ "You're crazy. It was a joke." Ibid., 78.

¹⁶ "I am amusing myself." Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ "This poor young woman is crazy!" Ibid., 60.

¹⁸ "Have mercy, my lords!...My tyrannical master robbed me of my innocence." Ibid., 91.

out what one expects to be a six bar phrase, but which extends an extra measure for another “*pietà*.” This is followed by a six bar phrase, in which the repetition of text and melody continues, but the tune is smoother, less panicked. The next phrase contains unexpected rests, opening with a full measure of rest in the voice part, a place for Leporello to collect his thoughts.

“*Il padron, con prepotenza*” and “*l’innocenza mi rubò*,” however, are even four-measure phrases, and the opening melody is strong in terms of rhythm, dynamics, and establishment of key (D major), ending in the dominant (A major). The next phrase gets suddenly quiet and turns unexpectedly to the parallel minor (d), with a much less forceful accompaniment of sustained whole notes. The repetition of “*l’innocenza mi rubò*” is even weaker, with rests after each syllable, and it becomes a three-measure phrase whose cadence elides with the next measure, and the aria returns to some of its previous characteristics: major mode and disjointed melodies.

The contrast of this phrase with the rest of the aria serves to reveal some of the conflict within Leporello. He explicitly connects his mistreatment at Don Giovanni’s hands with the mistreatment that the women have suffered, and also makes an explicitly *sexual* connection. Don Giovanni has a special love for “*la giovin principiante*,” Leporello tells Elvira in his catalogue aria—he enjoys robbing women of their sexual innocence. By connecting his forced participation in the charade with the way Don Giovanni has forced

himself on the women,¹⁹ he tries to show that they are on the same side, that he understands what kind of a master he has and what they are going through—but he backs off instead, first getting softer and then rushing into a new phrase. His identification with the women frightens him. As long as he envies Don Giovanni’s lifestyle, he can only condemn the immorality in a general sense, and can only align himself with the victims briefly in a moment of fear.

It is this envy that continually drives him back to Don Giovanni despite almost getting killed several times. The most curious case is during the finale to the first act, after Don Giovanni accuses him of attacking Zerlina (Figure 6). Don Giovanni’s “*Mori, iniquo... mori, dico*”²⁰ is a series of cadences, V⁷-I, but each time Leporello continues the tune with a downward scale, forcing key changes. On the last “*ah, cosa fate!*”²¹ he leaps up an octave, signifying his intensified emotion. As if Don Ottavio pointing a pistol at Don Giovanni were not enough evidence that the deception did not work, he, Donna Anna, and Donna Elvira enter continuing Leporello’s downward scale. No one addresses Leporello for the rest of the act; he could easily have escaped. Allying himself with Don Giovanni, putting himself in the way of the vengeful trio, has little advantage to Leporello at this point. And yet Leporello aligns himself musically with Don Giovanni, singing with him in

¹⁹ One can read varying degrees of metaphor there, which I think would not be out of character.

²⁰ “Die, villain! Die, I say!”

²¹ “What are you doing?”

harmony and even in unison and following him in imitation.

In the duet opening the second act, Leporello claims “non vo’ restar”²² because Don Giovanni has “quasi amazzarmi.”²³ This time Don Giovanni placates him with money, which Leporello accepts with a show of reluctance: “Per questa volta / la cerimonia accetto; / ma non vi ci avvezzate.”²⁴ But the lighthearted character of the duet, the way Leporello echoes Don Giovanni’s melodies, and the comical repetitions of “sì” and “no” suggest that Leporello was never serious about leaving his master. This is, rather, an ongoing ritual between them, a dance in which Leporello resists but finally acquiesces—another parallel with the women, despite Leporello’s protests.²⁵

Leporello continues to stay with Don Giovanni because it is his only chance to “far’ il gentiluomo.”²⁶ Despite his knowledge that the way Don Giovanni treats women is wrong, he attempts to imitate it. When Don Giovanni first attempts to seduce Zerlina, for example, Leporello says of the band of peasant girls, “Fra tante, per mia fè, vi sarà qualche cosa anche per me!”²⁷ After Don Giovanni offers Masetto and Zerlina his

protection, Leporello echoes the sentiment to explain what he is doing with the peasant girls. In the first finale, he imitates Don Giovanni’s seduction of Zerlina with one of the peasant girls (Figure 7).

The deception of Donna Elvira is Leporello’s big chance to imitate Don Giovanni. His words show his conflict between his empathy for Elvira and his desire to have adventures like his master. He diverts responsibility for his part in the deception, blaming Don Giovanni’s “mendace labbro”²⁸ and praying, “protegete, o dei, / la sua credulità!”²⁹ But he is the one who continues the deception, promising never to leave Elvira and then saying to himself, “La burla mi dà gusto!”³⁰ Although the seduction ends badly, it is the farthest Leporello gets in the opera, a step up from chasing peasant girls—this is only because Don Giovanni set him up, but he will take advantage of the little bit he can get.

In the dinner scene, this little bit is “questo pezzo di fagiano”³¹ from his master’s dinner table. This shows that it is not only the sexual aspect of Don Giovanni’s life that interests Leporello. He envies all the comforts of a nobleman, one of which is the ability to have any woman he wants, but another is simply the ability to have a warm bed and to satisfy a “barbaro appetito”³² with “bocconi da gigante”³³ instead of

²² “I don’t want to stay.”

²³ “You almost had me killed!” Fisher, *Mozart’s Don Giovanni*, 78.

²⁴ “I’ll accept it just this once, but don’t make it a habit.” Ibid., 79.

²⁵ “Non credete / di sedurre i miei pari / come le donne, a forza di danari!” (“Don’t think that you can seduce me with the power of money the way you do the women.” Ibid., 79.)

²⁶ “To be a gentleman.” Ibid., 42.

²⁷ “I have faith that soon one of them might be for me.” Ibid., 54.

²⁸ “Lying lips.”

²⁹ “I hope the gods protect her from her uncertainty!” Ibid., 81.

³⁰ “I’m really enjoying this game.” Ibid., 83.

³¹ “This piece of pheasant.” Ibid., 104.

³² “Barbarous appetite.” Ibid., 103.

³³ “Gigantic mouthfuls.” Ibid., 103.

“mangier male e mal dormir.”³⁴

Although Leporello realizes that Don Giovanni’s lifestyle is immoral and harmful, as long as he stays he can have little tastes of the fantasy without facing the consequences that his master ultimately must. After Don Giovanni is dragged into hell, however, Leporello’s sense of morality wins out: he responds, not too sadly, that he must “trovar padron miglior.”³⁵

³⁴ “I endure poor food and little sleep.” *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵ “Find a better master.” *Ibid.*, 111.

Figure 1

Figure 1 displays a musical score for two characters, Don Giovanni and Leporello, in a scene from the opera Don Giovanni. The score is written for two voices, L. (Leporello) and G. (Don Giovanni), with piano accompaniment. The first system shows Don Giovanni singing (gaily) and Leporello responding. The second system shows Leporello singing (crossly) and Don Giovanni responding. The lyrics are in Italian and English.

Don Giovanni. (*gaily*)
 guarda - te, con qual in - dif - fe - ren - za se ne vie - ne! Oh. Le - po - rel - lo mi - o! va tutto
 look at him, so cool, just as if nothing e'er had happen'd. Well, how are matters going, my Lepo -

Leporello. (*crossly*)
 bene? Don Gio - va - ni - no mi - o, va tut - to male! Co - me va tut - to ma - le? Vado a
 rello? Much worse they scarcely could be, my gay young master. Worse say'st thou, how can that be? To your

Figure 2

Figure 2 displays a musical score for two characters, Leporello and Don Giovanni, in a scene from the opera Don Giovanni. The score is written for two voices, L. (Leporello) and G. (Don Giovanni), with piano accompaniment. The first system shows Leporello singing (from the wall) and Don Giovanni responding. The second system shows Leporello singing and Don Giovanni responding. The lyrics are in Italian and English.

Leporello. (*from the wall*) Don Giovanni.
 Chi mi chia - ma? Non co - no - sci il pa - dron? Co - sì nol co - nosces - si! Co - me,
 Some one call'd me? Don't you yet know my voice? I don't know it at all, sir. Don't you?

Leporello.
 bir - bo? Ah, sie - te voi? scu - sa - te! Co - sa è sta - to? Per ca - gion
 scoundrel. Oh, is it you? ex - cuse me. What has hap - pen'd? On your ac -

Figure 3

Allegro. Leporello.

Ma-da - mi - na! Il ca - ta - lo - go è
Pretty la - dy! Here's a list I would

que - sto, del - le bel - le, che a - mo il padron mi - o; un ca - ta - lo - go e -
shew you, Of the fair ones my mas - ter has courted, Here you'll find them all

Figure 4

46 *Andante con moto.*

Nel - la — bionda e - gli ha l'u - san - za di lo - dar - la
Is a — maiden fair and slender, He will praise her

Figure 5

48

pel pia - cer — di por - le in li - sta. sua passion pre - do - mi -
That their names may grace these pag - es, But what most he's bent on

nan - te — è la gio - vin prin - ci - pian - te; *Fz*
win - ning, is of youth the sweet be - ginning, *Fz*
Vz

Figure 6

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 141-143) features a vocal line (G) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics in Italian and English. The piano accompaniment includes a right-hand part (treble clef) and a left-hand part (bass clef). The second system (measures 144-146) continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line includes a section where the character Don Octavio speaks. The piano accompaniment includes a right-hand part (treble clef) and a left-hand part (bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

System 1 (Measures 141-143):

Vocal (G):
 me — la — pe — na — vrà, la pe — na — vrà! mo — ri — ni — quo!
 ceive — thy — just — re — ward, thy just re — ward! Wretch, thou di — est!

Piano (L):
 Ah, co — sa
 Oh pray, have

System 2 (Measures 144-146):

Vocal (G):
 mo — ri, di — co!
 Churl, thou li — est!

Vocal (L):
 fa — te!
 done, sir!

Piano (L):
 ah co — sa
 oh pray, have

Don Octavio (taking out a pistol; to Don Giovanni.)

Vocal (O):
 Nol spe — ra — te! nol spe — ra — te!
 Get you gone, sir, get you gone, sir!

Piano (L):
 fa — te!
 done, sir!

Figure 7

129

Zerlina (smiling shyly)

tria ter-mi-nar! Don Giovanni (caressingly) Sua bon-
grief it will turn. You're so

tria ter-mi-nar! Sei pur va-ga, brillan-te Zer-li-na!
grief it will turn. E-ver charming, my pretty Zer-li-na!

Wind. Vins.

Leporello (Amongst the girls, imitating his master.)

ta! Sei pur ca-ra, (gia-not-ta, San-dri-na!
kind! Masetto (aside, enraged) Al-ways lovely, my fine Al-phon-si-na!

La-bric-co-na fa fe-sta! Toc-ca
How the flirt is co-quet-ting! That my

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It features two systems of staves. The first system includes a vocal line (Zerlina) and a piano accompaniment. The second system includes a vocal line (Leporello) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Italian and English. The score is numbered 129 in the top right corner.